

July 31, 1969

Dr. Asger F. Langlykke, Executive Director
American Society for Microbiology
1913 I Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20006

Dear Asger:

I was interested to receive your communication relative to Doctor Martin Alexander's concern over the quarantine of the Apollo 11 astronauts. I, too, agree that an expert committee should be used. In fact, I have been wondering where NASA has been getting its advice. As one somewhat familiar with host-parasite relationships, I cannot conceive a more absurd exhibition than we have just witnessed. It is most unfortunate that the astronauts have been subjected to this ludicrous exercise. The time and effort involved could have been spent in meaningful scientific experiments.

While their fears may have some justification on the Mars expedition, even then I am not sure it is worth the effort. If we look at the problem rationally and intelligently, even though one goes through with this "intellectual masturbation" there is no assurance that one will detect living organisms by the methods used. We have many diseases here on earth which would never be detected by these methods. Infectious mononucleosis, hemorrhagic fever, and even leprosy are but a few examples. The "germfree mice" are good newspaper copy, but damn poor science! Doctor Alexander must realize that he can cultivate only a fraction of the living organisms in a soil sample. I do believe that Doctor Lederberg is behaving more like a columnist than a scientist. One must respect these people, but in my opinion they are doing more harm than good. The Fiji Island example is not at all applicable, unless there are human beings on the moon or Mars. The measles virus is highly host-specific, and I see no justification to apply this example to any organism we might find on a planet in some other form. I wonder how long it took the rickettsiae to adapt to man after it first parasitized the body louse. It seems to me that we have adequate examples



Dr. Langlykke
Page 2


of mutations among organisms on earth, yet man has survived and proliferated over the millenium. On the whole he has developed a fairly efficient mechanism to handle foreign materials, be they organisms or tissue. If you don't believe it, ask the transplantation people!

The type of indoctrination being disseminated by Alexander and Lederberg continues to sensitize the American people to a point where we have become so germ conscious that we are perhaps the most susceptible nation in the world to the psychological effects of microbiological warfare, perhaps its most effective aspect. As a result of this, I believe an enemy with some imagination could seriously disrupt our nation by this technique and yet never employ a single living agent! Our behavior as a people during the polio epidemic is an example of the type of hysteria which is a result of this continual propaganda foisted upon the American people. It is indeed great for the mouth wash industry!

I think it is time for the microbiologists to begin using their science in a rational and intelligent manner. The exhibition we have just witnessed with the Apollo 11 is not even applicable to science fiction in the funny papers; as a serious scientific exercise, it is ridiculous!

With kind regards,

Sincerely,



Dennis W. Watson
Professor and Head

DWW:p

CC: Dr. Martin Alexander
Dr. J. Lederberg